

# Flight of the Nez Perce

Yellowstone National Park  
P.O. Box 168  
Yellowstone, WY 82190  
[www.nps.gov/yell](http://www.nps.gov/yell)

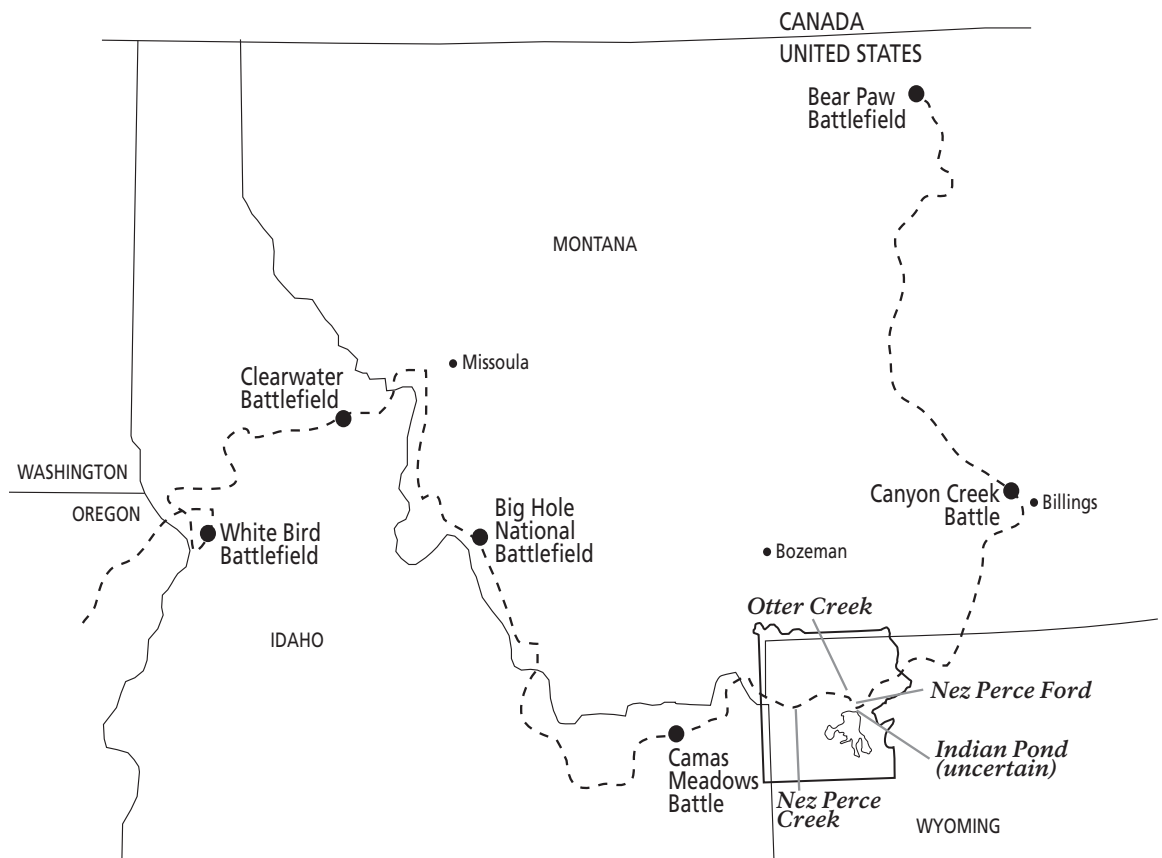


## Why the Flight?

Summer 1877 brought tragedy to the Nez Perce (or, in their language, Ni-Mii-puu). Many of their tribe had been removed from homelands to a reservation, but several bands had refused. Now the U.S. Army was ordered to put the remaining Nez Perce there. These bands objected at first, but then their leaders decided to bring their people to the reservation peacefully. The bands gathered at a summer rendezvous site in Idaho, where young warriors decided to avenge their

relatives' killing by attacking and killing nearby settlers. With all hopes for peace shattered, Nez Perce leaders began moving their people east as the Army gave chase. Their flight of approximately 750 people and 1,400 horses was marked by skirmishes and battles, the last of which stopped them more than 1,000 miles away from their homeland and less than 40 miles from safety in Canada.

The Nez Perce traveled northeast from their homeland in the Wallowa Mountains of Oregon, across the Snake River, then into north-central Idaho. After the battle at Clearwater, they followed well-worn trails across the rugged Bitterroot Mountains, entering Montana near Lolo Pass. They moved without conflict south to the Big Hole, where the Army surprised them and killed Nez Perce of all ages. After that, the Nez Perce moved as quickly as they could through more mountains, across Yellowstone, then north toward Canada.



## Into the Park

The Nez Perce entered Yellowstone on August 23rd. They knew the park well, having visited often and traveled through to the buffalo hunting grounds of the Great Plains. During the two weeks they crossed the park, the Nez Perce encountered about two dozen people, mostly visitors. They attacked two tourist parties to take supplies; they intended no harm but gunfire erupted and several visitors were wounded and one killed. A rebellious warrior later shot another visitor at Mammoth Hot Springs.

The group continued traveling through the park and over the Absaroka Mountains. They eluded Army troops in a deep, narrow

canyon of the Clark's Fork of the Yellowstone River. At Canyon Creek, near Billings, they battled the Army again, then continued their flight toward Canada.

The last battle occurred in the foothills of the Bear's Paw Mountains, less than 40 miles from the Canadian border, in October. After fierce fighting, the U.S. Army laid siege to the Nez Perce camp. Some Nez Perce escaped into Canada, but the rest surrendered on October 5. This is where it is believed Chief Joseph said, "From where the sun now stands, I will fight no more forever." The 1,170-mile flight had ended.

## Commemorating the Flight



Nee-Me-Poo and Ni-mii-puu are different spellings of the Nez Perce name for their people.

The flight of the Nez Perce is commemorated at 38 sites in Washington, Oregon, Idaho, and Montana as part of the Nez Perce National Historical Park. The sites include Big Hole National Battlefield and Bear Paw Battlefield, a National Historic Landmark.

In addition, their path is designated as the Nez Perce (Nee-Me-Poo) National Historic Trail. The portion in Yellowstone National Park crosses or approaches the main park road in four places: Nez Perce Creek, Otter Creek, Nez Perce Ford, and Indian Pond. (See map on the other side.) The Nez Perce entered the park along the Madison River, traveled up Nez Perce Creek past Mary

Mountain, crossed the Yellowstone River at Nez Perce Ford, traveled up Pelican Valley, then left the park as they crossed the Absaroka Mountains.

If you travel other parts of this trail outside the park, look for booklets and exhibits explaining events of the Nez Perce flight along each segment.

Wherever you encounter the trail, you will be following the Nez Perce route and portions of many trails walked by generations of Native Americans over thousands of years. The Nez Perce route was used in its entirety only once, but they consider the trail to be part of their sacred land.

## About the Nez Perce



Chief Joseph

Traditionally, Nez Perce lived in separate bands and were led by various warriors. This fluid social and political system allowed them to move in small groups during times of low resources (such as winter) and as large groups during times of abundance (such as summer). But this system—used by many tribes—also confused U.S. treaty negotiators who assumed the signature and agreement of one band bound the entire tribe. This confusion is part of what caused the troubles of 1877: several bands never sold their land to the federal govern-

ment and never agreed to move to a reservation. The most famous leader of these bands, Joseph, was one of several who led their people on the journey of 1877. Other leaders included Looking Glass, Poker Joe, and White Bird.

Today, Nez Perce descendants of this trek live among three groups: the Chief Joseph Band of the Confederated Tribes of the Colville Reservation in Washington, the Confederated Tribes of the Umatilla Indian Reservation in Oregon, and the Nez Perce Tribe in Idaho.

## For More Information

[www.nps.gov/yell](http://www.nps.gov/yell)  
[www.greateryellowstone.org](http://www.greateryellowstone.org)  
[www.fs.fed.us/npnht](http://www.fs.fed.us/npnht)  
[www.nps.gov/nepe](http://www.nps.gov/nepe)

*American Indians and National Parks*, Robert H. Keller and Michael F. Turek  
*Indians of Yellowstone National Park*, Joel Janetski

*Nez Perce Summer 1877: The U.S. Army and the Nee-Me-Poo Crisis*, Jerome A. Greene  
*Restoring a Presence: American Indians and Yellowstone National Park*, Peter Nabokov and Lawrence Loendorf

"Associated Tribes," Yell 246 (available free for the asking at park visitor centers)  
The Yellowstone Association sells many history books in visitor center bookstores.